PIRRO LIGORIO

Tradition has always credited Pirro Ligorio with the design of the villa and the garden and the latest scholarly works, including Coffin's depth study, do confirm the attribution. Although absolute proof has never turned up, it must also be remembered that such proof is lacking for other firm attributions, some even more famous than the Villa d'Este.

Pirro Ligorio was born into a noble Neapolitan family c. 1513-1514. After receiving a literary-artistic education, he most likely was placed under the tutelage of an established artist so that he could master the arts of painting and drawing. We have no record of who his teachers were, but his style and passion for architecture lead us to believe that they belonged to the Humanistic-artistic circles then flourishing in Naples. From his masters, Ligorio absorbed a knowledge of Latin and « antique culture » which later brought him fame as one of the most knowledgeable scholars of Antiquity in his day. His competence grew and developed in Rome where we find him in 1534, busily engaged in decorating palace façades. One of the earliest works definitely attributed to him is the fresco decoration of the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato (St. John the Beheaded). The murals portray the Dance of Salome and the Beheading of the Baptist. Although it has been suggested that he worked in the studio of a painter connected with the school of Raphael, it was Michelangelo, whose style then dominated the art world, who had the greatest influence on him in his formative years.

That Ligorio was accepted as member of the « Associazione dei Virtuosi del Pantheon » (the Virtuosi Association of the Pantheon) is proof of his solid reputation as an artist of great intellectual stature. In fact, this society which was founded by Desiderio and Pietro d'Aiutorio in 1542 and headed by Antonio da Sangallo in 1546 served to unite the elite of the art and scholarly worlds of the day.

In 1549 Ligorio entered the service of Cardinal Ippolito who commissioned him to paint one of the friezes of the Monte Giordano palace in Rome. From 1550 to 1554 he served as the Cardinal's personal « antiquario » at the yearly salary of seven *scudi* and seven *baiocchi*. This position entailed a complex job: he was in charge of exploring and excavating Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, after which measurements of the ruins had to be taken. Ligorio drew up three reports on the digs and made a drawing of the villa itself.

We might logically suppose that among the many personages belonging to Cardinal Ippolito's circle it was Ligorio who discussed the plans for the new villa with him. Clearly Ippolito's villa drew its inspiration from Hadrian's Villa. Not only were the architectural and decorative elements influenced, but also the cultural references are related and even the numerous art works then being unearthed had their importance.

The complex of the Hundred Fountains with its reliefs based on Ovid's Metamorphoses reveals more than any other this erudite passion for antiquity. Then too the Oval-Tivoli Fountain (Hadrian's Villa at the time was known as « Old Tivoli »), which architecturally speaking is the most important and original part of the whole undertaking, undoubtedly represents a highly-refined, highly-developed re-elaboration of the Hadrianesque architectural motifs. And this holds true not only for particular structures, as had already been noted (in the comparison of the Oval Fountain to the *Canopus* of Hadrian's Villa), but even entails a more sweeping connection, i.e. in the overall use of the curvilinear which appeared for the first time in such scale in Hadrian's villa-city.

Nevertheless Hadrian's Villa was not alone in influencing Ligorio while he was working on the new d'Este villa: he had in fact measured and drawn up the plans of the huge hexagonal Villa degli Acilii on the Pincio Hill and the monumental complex of the Sanctuary of Fortuna at Palestrina. The idea for the design probably came to Ligorio from the sanctuary where curvilinear forms were used for the first time in Roman architecture. Due to insurmountable differences in the environmental conditions, Hadrian's Villa could not have provided such a solution whereas the sanctuary bore similarities to the villa being built, in both size and terrain configuration.

In fact, there was an important problem which had to be solved, i.e. unlike the other Renaissance villas located on flat or relatively flat land evened out by terracing, the land destined for the garden of the Villa d'Este lay upon a steep slope. Consequently, since an asymmetrical layout would have marred the unity of the building-garden complex (which had happened in Hadrian's Villa and numerous Renaissance equivalents), the sole solution lay in an axial composition broken up by narrow orthogonal terraces and the use of transversal and oblique ramps to overcome the problem of the uneven terrain. This is exactly what had been done seventeen centuries before in the Sanctuary of Palestrina.

The axial composition, in addition to providing unity to the whole, also provided — just as in the sanctuary — the scenic element, which thus resulted complete whether the viewpoint was the lower en-